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An Unknowable Wildness: An Analysis of Cryptids as Queer Cultural Iconography

The figure of the cryptid has recently gained prevalence in queer popular culture and online communities¹. Cryptids – such as Mothman, the Loch Ness Monster, and the Sasquatch – are generally understood to be animals whose existence is disputed or unsubstantiated, or creatures who exist on the margins of biological understanding to the point of being mythical. The draw of queer communities to “cryptid culture”, and its suggestions of the profoundly strange, has even moved to include some horror creatures such as the Babadook, reaffirming the desired qualities of the uncanny, the unsettling, and that which exists outside of our normative understandings. Cryptids are claimed as queer through online posts of on forums such as Tumblr; in these posts, queer people depict themselves as cryptids², depict cryptids as being queer³, or position cryptids as defenders of vulnerable queer subjects⁴.

Though the adoption of strange creatures as mascots of the queer community may seem heavy-handed (in comparisons, for instance, of the invisibility of both cryptids and some queer people), I contend that the use of cryptids as queer icons accesses multiple queer critiques of normative culture, effectively constituting a symbolic and popularized undertaking of post-structural identity positionings. In a contemporary moment characterized by neoliberal individualism, digital communities, and reclamations of queer pasts, the strategic deployment of “cryptid culture” turns queer theoretical impulses into expressions of lived experience through an

¹ My use of “queer” in this paper references not only gay and lesbian sexuality but any and all sexual and gender identities which take as primary an opposition to heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Thus, I do not take up tensions between particular categorical distinctions (at the risk of erasure) but use “queer” provisionally as a placeholder for those individuals who – in taking up “cryptid culture” – express anti-normativity.

² E.g. posed photographs by transgender Tumblr user julykings with the caption “[me as a local cryptid](#)”

³ E.g. a text post by Tumblr user therealraewest which claims the [Babadook and Mothman as gay](#)

⁴ E.g. several blog posts by Tumblr user queercryptidsposting which are comprised of drawings of cryptids against queer flags with captions such as “[Its okay to be different, normal isn’t always correct](#)” as well as mood boards created by Tumblr user ddnosakechi connecting cryptids with the protection of transgender kids, captioned: [“because we all know recorded sightings of cryptids have involved them hurting transphobes and helping trans kids, right?”](#)

optimistic engagement with symbolism. The first part of this essay will describe the contemporary cultural circumstances that contribute to an attraction to cryptids as queer expression. Specifically, I will argue that the identification of cryptids as queer both reclaims and challenges a past in which queerness was considered monstrous; that the possibilities inherent in online spaces facilitate creative practices of self-representation which allow critiques to be mounted symbolically; and that the adoption of the cryptid as a figure aligns with neoliberal models of queer and transgressive exceptionalism. After situating “cryptid culture” within these conditions of possibility, I will argue that queer cryptid symbolism mounts post-structuralist theoretical critiques through its joining of queerness and the mythos of the unnatural. These critiques include the destabilization of identity, “wildness” as a challenge to the naturalization of heterosexuality, and the ideological threat posed by the monstrous to the sacred heterosexual family. Finally, this paper will demonstrate not only that “cryptid culture” is more complex and politically effective than widely acknowledged, but that its ability to make salient post-structuralist queer concepts is creating new cultural directions for radical queer theory to pursue.

A Short History of (Queer) Monsters

Throughout the twentieth century, queer identity was positioned as an ambiguous but serious threat to society’s vulnerable, especially children. As Gayle Rubin points out in her essay “Thinking Sex,” 1950s moral crusades grouped “the homosexual menace” with other “perverse” or “monstrous” segments of humanity (i.e. sex offenders and pedophiles) through qualities like predatoriness (269). A cultural and moral fear of queerness was established, the effects of which linger in several conservative discourses today, and which easily become a site of critical attack through an alliance with monstrous cryptids. As one cultural piece addressing the recent cryptid-

affinity notes, the accusation that queer people are monsters is being met with a definitive response of “[w]e’ll show you monsters. And this time, no one’s locking us back in a cage” (Brammer). This position is not new, and was advocated for by transgender theorist Susan Stryker throughout the 1990s, particularly through her creative work on *Frankenstein’s Monster*. What more perfect expression of transgender (or queer) rage could there be than a monstrous revolt against a socially sanctioned position of exclusion? “Like the monster,” Stryker says, “I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment [...] [and] direct [my rage] against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist” (“Rage” 238). Stryker reclaims the monster as an allegory for her own struggles with creation and abjection, and cryptid culture represents a pervasive acceptance of her envisioned reclamation of the queer monstrous. This functions, I argue, much like the reclamation of queer as a self-descriptor: both take something once leveled as a dehumanizing insult at queer people, and find the simultaneous at-home-ness and tacit power which flows from owning a discursive weapon. As younger queer communities face their own struggles against queerphobic societies, ownership of terms like “monster” and “unnatural” become important ways of “dispel[ling] their ability to harm us” (Stryker, “Rage” 240). For this reason cryptids become a compelling metaphor for the feared outsider posing a threat to safely normative constructions. While these reclamations have existed for decades, there are certain conditions met by post-modern culture which make this critique culturally accessible and particularly symbolically desirable.

Cryptids on the World Wide Web

The transference of some of the processes of identity formation and expression to online spaces is one of these conditions. The symbolic and reiterative aspects of cryptids becoming part

of an acknowledged queer iconography is facilitated by a widespread use of the Internet to form digital queer communities. Susan Driver, in her analysis of identity performance/performativity in online spaces, notes that youth use the Internet “as a realm to try out, play with, and perform their identities and desires through provisional combinations of images, words, and narratives” (170). The relative playfulness with which contemporary queer culture proceeds allows for creative practices of self-representation, in which the expression of queerness is not only tied to individual narrative and practice, but to the establishment of connection through the creation of “queer culture” and its rapidly changing aesthetics and affinities. Posts simply stating that “cryptids are non-binary culture⁵” stake claims and establish precedent for the creation of art and writing through which individual queer-identified people attach a collective aesthetic symbol to their own participation in community. These cultural stylizations are discursively linked to identities, becoming a connective entity that transcends labels and the micro-categorical to mark a new way of being and articulating identity in digital space. The symbolic capacity of the Internet allows for identity to become detached from embodiment, thus complicating the “terms through which [youth] name their sexual and gender identities” (Driver 170). Because creations like Tumblr blogs and user profiles on forums do not require a literal representation of the embodied self, other visual and communal markers work to establish who is inside and outside of the “communities” that are formed online. Thus, symbols like cryptids represent a queer knowledge which becomes an entry point into the community as much as they represent a new way in which to participate in queer communities that links selfhood to creative expression rather than a deeply psychological ideal of the internal. Online, Driver argues, “the point is not to tell the truth [regarding identity] but rather to [...] encourage[e] creative practices of self-

⁵ <https://its-nonbinary-culture.tumblr.com/post/163560246690/cryptids-are-nonbinary-culture>

representation in relation to participation in community” (178). Representations of “queerness”, then, become increasingly discursive and linked to community value, which provides symbolic critiques – like the claiming of cryptids – with political leverage.

Neoliberal Individualism and Transgressive Pleasure

The final condition for an attachment to nature’s strangest possibilities is the rise of queer exceptionalism under neoliberal models of identity. Jasbir Puar argues that queer identity narratives (in Western cultures) “recenter the normative queer subject as an exclusively transgressive one” (22). Through the context of neoliberalism (which prizes the individual over the collective, thus heightening the stakes of “uniqueness”) this practice can be read as a way for queer people to turn their implicit resistance to norms (Puar 23) into social capital. Jack Halberstam adds that transgressive exceptionalism refers to “the practice of taking the moral high ground by claiming to be more oppressed and more extraordinary than others” (*Queer Time* 20): the more one transgresses norms and remains outside of dominant systems, the more that individual succeeds in a social world organized around consumerist individuality. By accessing the inherent weirdness symbolically attached to cryptids, queer individuals gain another lens through which to allegorize their exceptionalism. In the same vein, what Michel Foucault terms the “speaker’s benefit” works with theories of exceptionalism to explain the very real pleasure achieved by queer people through the (embodied or symbolic) transgression of social bounds. Expressing sexuality, queerness, or any facet of identity which appears silenced in discourse produces pleasure through the breaking of taboo (Foucault 6). By joining two concepts which denote outsider status, those who queer cryptids bring together what is perceived as a direct resistance to oppressive power and the “enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures”

(Foucault 7) that are linked to queer identity through exceptionalism. The increasing desirability of the individual queer subject position is thus expressed through the additional break with normativity that the cryptid represents as nature's outlaw. The gratification attached to transgressive queer individualism is affirmed by internet spaces, linking these two conditions of possibility. As Driver reports, online spaces position things like gender ambiguity "as a sign of being interesting and worth knowing" (188), making the deployment of a communally dictated sign of outlawry even more effective and desirable.

Radical Unknowability

Having described the conditions under which cryptids are claimed as queer, I will now argue that this claim brings several post-structural and queer critiques into the realm of lived queer culture. The first concept that cryptid culture solidifies for queer subjects is the theoretical doubt that subjectivity can ever be fully known, coherent, or stable. Both post-structuralism and queer political critique unsettle the assumption that there is an inherent reality attached to identity. Joshua Gamson summarizes this position as "a profound and well-articulated skepticism about the existence of social subjects who pre-exist their discursive constitution, whose 'experience' can simply be studied and represented" (356). For Gamson, queerness unsettles presumptions about identity previously solidified through systems of normativity; after adopting a queer critique, theorists can never assume identity "to be standing still, ready for its close up" (356). Judith Butler similarly destabilizes gender – which is always inherently tied to sexuality and thus a site of potential queerness – through her theory of performativity. As gender coherence flows from the repetitive citation of cultural norms rather than an internal gendered core, subject formation is inherently unstable. Following this, Butler argues, is the "impossibility

of a full recognition [...] of ever fully inhabiting the name by which one's social identity is inaugurated and mobilized" (18). The idea that those with queer identities are unrepresentable, performative, and never fully recognizable exists in tension with more positivist forms of identity articulation, but – as evidenced in the adoption of cryptid culture – has become a significant current of thought within queer communities.

The cryptid metaphorizes the unknowability that queer subjects introduce into seemingly stable identity systems. By claiming the cryptid, queer communities effectively draw a direct comparison between zoological systems of classification and those used to categorize identity. For nineteenth-century scientists, "[f]inding the truth of nature" for both animals and humans "became an obsession with wide-ranging socio-economic and cultural repercussions" (Azzarello 141). Just as natural taxonomies and species were being "identified" by scientists, the homosexual was becoming an identifiable species (Foucault 43). Those creatures which marry imagination, fear, and biological possibility disrupt these now-accepted taxonomies in much the same way queer post-structuralist critique disrupts the naturalization of identity taxonomies. Creature/identity being never fully in view under either, they cannot be classified, represented, captured, pinned down. Creatures "that defy taxonomy and always show up as blurry in photos" (Brammer) echo Gamson's assertion that identity is not awaiting capture by the eager researcher: in cryptid culture, both are fleeting and beyond current representational systems. Claiming the cryptid as symbol thus connotes dominance over a pervasive system of classification. Recalling Driver's claims about the playfulness and fluidity of online identity, the queer cryptid seems the perfect critical substance with which to fill a medium which allows for the assertion of agency over universalized understandings.

Further, cryptid culture appears to describe or allegorize theories such as performativity, making them culturally accessible outside of their shroud of academic language. Because of pervasive ties to authenticity, it is often difficult to highlight the constructedness of queer identity through personal narrative. Cryptid symbolism, however, allows for the detachment of queer subjectivity from an internal identity “truth,” instead accessing a queer theoretical critique while maintaining ties to community. This represents, I argue, the roots of a new form of activism that steps away from assimilationist techniques. Through a shared aesthetic culture, identity positivism becomes diffuse. Blank acceptance and celebration of queer identities are replaced by a deeper engagement with queer meanings, “for to be celebrated is to be identified, and to be identified is to be stabilized, to lose the nimble stance of critique” (Umphrey 21).

Queer Wildness

The second queer critique that cryptid culture exemplifies is the claiming of wildness as “the new term for queer vitality” (Halberstam, “Wildness” 138) which remains firmly outside of heteronormative contexts. Only through the embrace of wildness, argue theorists like Halberstam and Stryker, will new formations and acceptances of queerness become possible. The wild, which Halberstam provisionally describes as “undomesticated modes of life, disorderly behavior, the lack of moral restraint, excess in all kinds of forms” (“Go Gaga” 126), describes qualities which have been used to subjugate both queer and racialized bodies for centuries. In grappling with this past, Halberstam hopes that queer wildness will emerge as a stronger critique which can bypass binding modes of contemporary assimilationist normativity. “Queerness without wildness,” Halberstam dictates, “is just white homosexual desire out of the closet and in sync with a new normal” (“Wildness” 140). Thus, wildness becomes an attractive concept – both as a

mandate for queer theory and as a lived expression of queerness – because of its opposition to the very systems through which we currently define meritorious cultural critique. The wild poses the question of what would happen were queerness to truly and violently crash through the boundaries of acceptability, including the boundaries of humanity. By virtue of their position on the radical edges of culture, cryptids as a symbol maintain a position astride nature, accessing the energetic impetus of wildness.

A reference to those aspects of the “natural” (or para-natural) world which are unknown and unconfirmable through culture is accomplished through a reliance on wildness. The wild, in this case, is used to challenge the iteration of “naturalness” that is used to undermine queer bodies by defining a subject position outside of the expectations of the natural human body. Stryker takes this up as a trans positionality, noting that in the face of dehumanization, her recursive strategy became one of “forgo[ing] the human, a set of criteria by which I could only fail as an embodied subject” (“Transing” 227). For her, this was a movement away from the anthropocentric – an affinity for the chaotic wild as a queer haven. In fact, Stryker saw the work of transgender studies as troubling the seemingly immovable meanings of “human” altogether (“Transing” 229). This absolutely radical critique, which dares to prod the membrane which sanctifies the human, is resurging through cryptid culture. An organic symbolic alignment of the queer with the wild promises to provide not only liberatory possibilities for queer subjects but to create a better ethics of queer theorization. Through “remaking what human has meant and might yet come to be” (Stryker “Transing” 228), queer wildness calls for a redefinition of the structures from within which we theorize, and implies the implications of leaving behind such privileged and enlightened structures for “the chaos and blackness from which Nature itself spills forth” (Stryker “Rage” 251).

This once again beckons the monstrous, which is being popularly sublimated through the cryptid, as something with which queer theory must engage if it wants to remain awake to the oppression wrought by unsuspecting social systems. “Queer theory,” Halberstam urges, “come down on the side of chaos, must remain in productive tension with ‘the grotesque and the destructive’” (“Wildness” 142) lest it fall back into normative systems and the imperative to hiddenness. Queer cryptid culture is the first symbolic step towards an adoption of wildness as queer vitality. Through the use of a wild creature which is also fundamentally unknowable and thus anti-social, the cryptid as a queer symbol makes salient the ways in which society distinguishes between moral (natural) and immoral (unnatural) bodies, and between civilized and primitive meanings, defining wildness as the only full circumvention of a racist heteropatriarchy which tyrannizes the queer Other.

Threatening the Heterosexual Familial

The final queer critique that cryptid culture figuratively takes up is the infiltration of the sacred space of the heterosexual family. The queer(ed) monster, as referenced above, has long been a threat to the normative status of the nuclear family and the innocence of the children reared therein. This threat is most brilliantly articulated through the horror-creature, as in queer readings of *Babadook* which posit that the film metaphorically portrays a queer (and quite dramatic) monster invading the space and psyches of a white family through the figure of the young son⁶. The threat attached to the monstrous (especially when it comes to antagonizing children) has always been positioned against the normative within horror narratives – the

⁶ These readings were not initially prompted by the film itself but by Netflix’s mistaken categorization of *Babadook* as an LGBT film. While the mistake was later corrected, the proverbial damage had been done and queer people began to justify the ways in which the horror movie *was* queer, leading to dominant readings of the film as queer iconography in the same manner that cryptids are taken up.

uncanny outsider is only a threat to those whose preexisting safety can be compromised. Monstrous creatures, then, threaten the established meanings inherent within reproductive heterosexuality in the same manner as queers were said to throughout the 20th century. The short 1950s public service film “Boys Beware” is representative of the moral panic surrounding this threat, as it depicts the home and the heterosexual nuclear family as the last safe place of refuge against predatory homosexuals who descended upon public spaces. The narrative crafted in “Boys Beware” is mired in the horror trope; had it been the Babadook lurking in the park bathroom, the narrative would have remained (hilariously) intact. The process of making the queer and the monstrous synonymous through moral condemnation allows for the liberatory act of equating the two anew through readings of films and collective symbolic culture. When queer people take control of this horror narrative, the liberatory and pleasurable potential of an embodied threat to heterosexual society undermines straight moral panic. A reclamation of the monster here becomes a clear, understandable, and fun way to access a crucial queer position in particularity trying political times. Never quite cleanly fitting into the traditional hero narrative within dominant politics, and being reminded of that fact amid a resurgence of right-wing radicalism, prompts an unprecedented resoluteness. As one cultural critic notes, the cryptid is relevant *because* of the new alignment between queerness and monstrosity flowing from the White House. In taking back control of our narrative and our political voices, the most effective queer critique in the present is no longer a complicit assimilation, but the promise that “[w]e will be the antagonists” (Brammer) in the horror story being written around us.

Conclusion

Though the queer obsession with cryptids may be but a moment within a rapidly changing system of symbolic queer taxonomy, it feeds off of the historical, digital, and individualistic concerns of contemporary queer existence. And while the creepiness that younger queer people gravitate towards in their creative identity disclosures may soon be replaced, an isolation of queer cryptid culture provides an especially important insight into the unexpected ways in which the theoretical comes to play in the pleasures of shared culture, and vice versa. Queer and post-structuralist critiques of identity and heteronormativity become lived through the collective adoption of the cryptid, making these critiques culturally fluid and public. While the fact that queer popular culture continues to stay in step with radical theory (and mobilize itself towards the disruption of heteronormativity) is reassuring in itself, it is even more exhilarating that theory is being pushed in directions which will better serve queer communities. When queer and nature are read through each other's problematizing lenses in cryptid culture, wilder theoretical directions become apparent. This challenge "dramatizes [queer's] ontological impossibility" and asks queer academics to "consider alternative modes of representation" (Azzarello 154) outside of what our cultivated knowledge deems to be in service to queer liberatory projects. Queer cryptid culture – in all of its deliberate strangeness – has taken an initial step towards embracing queer's unintelligibility and wildness as critical elements, and beckons theory to abandon the safety of the human categorical and follow it into the wild unknown.

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